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ABSTRACT

A description of a 45-year university teaching career which included the development of a Speech and Communications department at California Polytechnic State University reveals that even though burn-out is a periodic influence on professional performance, one overriding element--a love of teaching--sustained the commitment of this professor. A few suggestions for maintaining a healthy attitude toward the profession and for coping with large teaching loads are set forth: (1) accept your students as they are and not as you would like them to be; (2) remember that when a teacher's patience becomes threadbare, a student's challenge begins; (3) allow for periodic time-outs that enable the development of scholarly activity and exchange; and (4) aim to turn the young student not into a copy-cat, but into an independent and self-motivating learner. (SAM)

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WHAT THE YEARS HAVE TOLD:

A PROFESSOR'S BURNOUT AND RECOVERY

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WHAT THE YEARS HAVE TOLD: A PROFESSOR'S
BURN OUT AND RECOVERY

Lest I quickly begin to sound like a garralous retired university professor who has a serious talking disease, a few observations seem to be in order. Two things have never been of much value to speakers: one, the use of notes to preserve the time element and secondly, the placement of the watch in a stragetic location on the lecturn. So our ruthless time keeper may be your salvation in the case of this speaker, especially with the topic announced and the time alotted. "What The Years Have Told: A Professor's Burn Out & Recovery." The topic lends itself from here to eternity.

For many years past the people of this country have knitted their brows over the short-comings of our total educational system. Outlandish statements were made when I commenced my teaching career 45 years ago and the brow knittings are just as profuse today. Possessed with a naivete make-up in my early years, I was sure it was my predestined job to change this eternal sterrotype of the teaching profession. So, upon being hired at the age of twenty two at a small liberal arts college in Oklahoma, this seasoned young professor set out to revolutionize the American mindset regarding the horrendous weakensses of the American educational system. With a verbal contractual assignment to teach sixteen units I was off to demonstrate my ability to change the aforementioned sterrotype of education in America. The

formal contract for my first higher education teaching assigment was simply a letter stating my momentous salary of $2500 for 9 months, teaching sixteen units per semester, plus the usual participation on committees and numerous other eclectic assignments. My first week on campus was a faculty workshop. Seventy five minutes out of the week was devoted to a conference with the academic dean, during which time the expectations of the only full time speech communication professor's assignment were spelled out. There were four part time teachers. A brief resume of that assignment was as follows: teach two sections of basic speech and two different upper division courses, which were persuasion and oral interp., give 10 private speech lessons per week, coach debate and direct one of the two full blown plays per year--this came in the spring semester when the duties of coaching debate simmered down---and sponsor the freshman class. In most instances it was not what background or capabilities one possessed, but what must be taught and done. Young and foolish, the attempt was made to tackle and cope with such a load. I became so entrenched in my preparation for teaching and extra-curricular activities that my thoughts of revolutizing the sterrotypical concept of higher education and the teacher in America was lost in the shuffle. To project to you the inner frustrations of coping with this prepostorous teaching assignment is a futilitarian effort indeed. My only comfort was that the majority of the faculty were similarly schackled. Loads

such as this were duplicated throughout the American educational system from kindergarten through a great deal of higher education, especially in the smaller liberal arts colleges. It is no small wonder, until the more recent past, that the teaching profession has suffered and has been the dart board of frustrations for the American intellectual breakdowns. Useless to say that in five years of such a teaching assignment severe burnout was encountered. Through it all, however, I fell in love with teaching, but a better way of coping had to be discovered. It was time to do something constructive and different for myself.

Brochures put out by the International Institute on Higher Education were offering summer scholarships to British Universities. With an application and volumes of information submitted, a scholarship was granted to spend a summer at Oxford University--subsidizing board, room and tuition. It was a refreshing experience, giving me self renewal and much needed intellectual stimulation. Upon my return to the Oklahoma college, with the fortitude to confront the dean on the prepostorous expectations of the speech professors and informing him that my written resignation at the end of the semester would be forthcoming. A new self confidence surged into my professional veins. At this juncture the dean ask that I continue my job, requested that I serve as the Dept. Head and that this

assignment would relieve me of six units of teaching for this administrative service. He also requested the speech curriculum and major be reworked and to actively proceed in hire another full time instructor for the following Sept. After five more years at this job the burnout fever reoccured. Now with almost a ten year grooming experience in teaching--seven of our departmental student majors having completed or in the process of completing the Ph.D. degree at very reputable institutions, and 11 students having completed the M.A. degree--a decision was made to pursue the Ph.D. program myself. With a teaching assistantship for three years and the completion of the Ph.D. degree at Penn State University another time of renewal was experienced. After a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship to Italy and two years with the U.S. government as a Communications Consultant in Europe, a burning inner compulsion to get back into higher education teaching begin to tighten its grip. Six years at Pasadena College as professor of speech communication and chair of the Division of Humanities, there was a compelling need for some sort of a drastic change. At this juncture California Polytechinc State University at San Luis Obispo, CA contacted me for a job as Professor of Speech communication and to develop a Speech Communication department at the Uiversity and serve as the chairperson, which I accepted and and continued until retirement. During these warlike years of trying to establish a reputable Speech Communi-

cation Department in a technological setting, participating in professional activities on the State, Regional and

National organizations were life savers in preventing the burnout disease. After ten years as department head and teaching, along with an extremely supportive faculty, an undergraduate department and major, second to none, was established. Again there was an inner compulsion that reappeared with urgings for a challenge beyond myself. So, application for a sabbatical leave was submitted, and the leave was granted.

With an inner conviction to turn the department reins over to someone else, I resigned to go on leave--durning which time teaching and traveling for four months in Australia and New Zealand and for six months doing a research project in Japan involving communiction in Japanese business and industry was a significant highlight of my professional career. Needless to say, during and after this research, opportunities to give experiences at conferences, seminars, workshops and do some writings on my research findings have kept me stimulated until and since my retirement.

Even though burnout was a periodic part of my professional life there was always one overriding element, I loved the classroom and keeping a follow-up of the students in the departments of which I was a part through the years.

From the aforementioned career in higher education, a few

suggestions from what the years have told me about teaching and one's professional life are set forth:

1. Accept your students as they are amd not as you would like them to be, always with the aim that their experiences, under your tutlege, will be a challenge for them to become more fulfullied persons than when they first came under your teaching.

2. Patience is a quality proverbally required for effective teaching, remembering when patience becomes thread-bare a student's challenge often begins, remembering also the teacher's stock of forbearance gives out before getting home at the end of the day.

3. Essential to a satisfying teaching career there must be periodic time out for tincturing your span of years with scholarly activity, the association with other professionals, the experiencing of varied activities in the world around you, the excitement of meaningful socialization, and the constant development of an awareness of what is current.

4. Finally, the whole aim of good teaching, said Jacques Barzun in his book Teacher In America, nearly fifty years ago, is to turn the young learner, by nature a little copycat, into an independent self-propelling creature, who cannot merely learn but study--that is work as their own boss to the limit of their powers."

For the most part William James sums things up at the end of his career , and hopefully what most teachers might say at the end of their careers, "For forty five years I have been suffering the exigencies of being a teacher, the pretension and the duty namely, of meeting the mental needs and difficulties of other persons, needs that I couldn't possibly imagine and difficulties that I couldn't possibly understand; and now that I have shuffled off the professional coil, the sense of freedom that comes to me is as surprising as it is exquisite. . . What! not to have to

accommodate myself to this mass of alien and recalcitrant humanity, not to think under resisitance, not to have to square myself with others at every step I make--hurrah! it is too good to be true."